

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly.

What do we do when there are no words?

What do we do when the pain is too great?

When the despair is too deep?

The exhaustion too complete?

What do we do when the simplest question

“How are you doing?”

Opens up existential dimensions we simply cannot parse?

It has been nine months since we last gathered together in this place to sing and embrace, to praise God and enjoy one another, to whoever we are and wherever we found ourselves on our journey of faith come to this table to receive the gifts of bread and wine made holy.

It has been nine months since the announcement of stay at home. Nine months. And as the days shorten, the nights lengthen and we prepare for the nine months of Mary's pregnancy to end in the joy of Christmas, we are being told that our isolation, that the hospitalizations, the overflowing ICUs, the death tolls, jobs lost, anxiety, separation, loneliness, talking with each other only online and through masks... will continue.

What mother, after nine months of pregnancy, of nausea, aches, pains, anxieties, fatigue, constipation, bloating, hemorrhoids and having to pee a hundred times a day would welcome being told ... what do ya say? Let's do nine more!

It would be inconceivable. There would be no words.

And yet here we are.

What do we do when there are no words?

We groan.

There is something primal about groaning. It is almost an involuntary function. Groaning, sighing, wailing ... this is what we do when there are no words. When the pain, the longing, the frustration, the exhaustion are too great.

A mother, cradling her dead child, does not offer a soliloquy. She groans. She wails. There are no words sufficient to express her pain.

Lovers long separated by time and miles and even by death may write sonnets to one another, but alone in the night when they ache for each other's touch, it is not lyrics but longing groans that flow from their hearts.

When we are alone, head in a pillow, unsure how we are going to bear one more day of isolation from friends and family,

When we drop someone off at the hospital and aren't allowed to go in with them and hope we aren't saying a last goodbye.

When school is staring at a screen for eight hours a day and at a time in our lives when nothing is more important than friends seeing them is the one thing we cannot do... it is not words but sighs, wails and groans that come from us.

So just for a moment, let's meet in that space. Acknowledge that there are no words. That the pain is too great, the exhaustion too complete.

Just for a moment, let's meet in that space beyond words ... and groan.

I mean it ... wherever you are, right now, let's just groan ... together.

(Groan)

OK ... now again ... only louder.

(Groan)

OK .. one more time ... only this time really let it out, let it go from a moan to a scream.

(Groan to scream)

Yes! That's it! That's how we are feeling. And the first thing we need to do is acknowledge it, express it, know that you do not groan alone. Our groaning is shared, our groaning is natural, our groaning is sacred.

Our groaning is part of the natural order of things.

More on groaning in a moment.

This morning's readings from Dr. Wil Gafney's woman's lectionary give us three stories of annunciation, of news of miraculous births.

Genesis gives us Abraham and Sarah.

The Gospel gives us Mary and Elizabeth.

And then there is Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul gives us our annunciation. The announcement of what is being born in us and through us. What the entire creation is waiting to birth, to become.

It's poetry. It really is. I just wish it wasn't Paul. Because I really struggle with Paul.

Perhaps more than any other part of scripture, Paul's letters have been used to anoint and sustain the worst of humanity. It is Paul who says "slaves be subject to your masters" and "wives be subject to your husbands" and asks all of us to be subject to the state. There is a resignation to an unjust status quo that seems to run throughout Paul and that has been used to keep things as they are.

And yes, I've read some of the scholarship and I'm deeply grateful for those who have tried to take the more problematic parts of Paul and frame them differently. And yet, I sometimes wonder if it is even advisable or possible to redeem Paul. If the gymnastics required are just too great. I know I'm not alone in this. The great theologian Howard Thurman used to read the Bible to his grandmother, but she would never let him read Paul to her. And finally, he asked her why, and this is what she said:

"During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."

And certainly, the passage we hear today from Romans 8 has been used this way. Paul writes:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

This passage has been used for nearly 2000 years to convince those among us who are suffering to be content with suffering. That their suffering is even a good because it is leading to something better ... but even if it isn't that it is truly only a mild inconvenience compared with the pie in the sky that will come by and by.

This passage has been used by those who have power to keep it... and to try to convince those who have none to be happy about it.

In the latest season of the Crown, in the final episode the Queen is sitting with Margaret Thatcher trying to convince her of the wisdom of Thatcher “doing nothing” in the face of what the prime minister sees as an unjust attack on her position and authority.

This has been a theme throughout the four seasons of the show. The crown is not supposed to do anything. Not supposed to express an opinion. Not supposed to take a side. That is what dignity of monarchy looks like. Inaction is a virtue ... undergirded by the belief that all things are in God’s hands.

But this belief also holds that God has divinely ordained the monarchy. Which makes doing nothing in the face of injustice the path prudentially the path of least risk for those who wear the crown. The path to most surely preserve what they have ... to maintain a status quo that assures their privilege.

So the Queen is sitting with the prime minister and berating her for her tendency to act ... always to act.

“Perhaps the time has come” says the Queen, “for you to try doing nothing for once.”

“The difference is,” Prime Minister Thatcher replies, “you have power in doing nothing. I ... will have nothing.”

“You will have your dignity,” the Queen suggests, her own dignity assured by monarchy and all its trappings.

To which Thatcher responds: “There is no dignity in the wilderness.”

If we read this passage from Romans as a command to do nothing in the face of larger forces. If we read it as counsel merely to “wait with patience for what we do not see” in the face of injustice, then I believe, with Howard Thurman’s grandmother, that it is better left unread. For it will continue to assign a precious few to the throne and countless others to the wilderness.

And ... there is deeper wisdom here. And it begins with groaning.

Paul writes “we know that the *whole creation* has been groaning in labor pains until now.” The whole creation. Not just some people. The Greek word Paul uses for groaning is **συστενάζω** (*soos-ten-ad’-zo*) – and it means “to experience a *common* calamity.”

This is not about those who suffer enduring their sufferings and those who do not being spared the trouble. Paul is talking about all of us groaning together. Each of us participating in, feeling, groaning at the suffering of the other.

And even though Paul, like me, could not have known firsthand anything approaching the pain of childbirth, that is the metaphor he is using and Paul and I and everyone know that what comes with childbirth is not a gentle moan. It is a scream. It is a wail.

Part of how Paul has been used is to reinforce a world where we are separated from each other's screams ... where we are even shielded from having to consider the ways we cause each other's screams.

In ways never imagined by Paul, the whole creation is groaning. The very planet is crying out in ways that demand we not simply wait in patience for a glory to be somehow revealed any more than a mother passively just waits for her baby to arrive. There is no stork that will neatly drop either a clean and tidy child or a restored planet or a truly just society into our arms.

The whole creation has been groaning for a long time, but we have not been groaning together. And that is the opportunity of this pandemic. By definition, this pandemic is touching everyone. Every one of us is groaning. And that is our strange gift.

If you ask great choir directors like Jenny Tisi and Weicheng Zhao what is the most important part of singing together, they will tell you that it is not what comes out of your mouth but what goes into your ear. The key to singing together is listening. Because when we listen, we can then blend our voices with others in a beautiful chorus.

The same is true with our groaning. Even as we are groaning ourselves, we listen ... listen deeply to the groanings of the rest of creation. We recognize that our pain, our despair, our exhaustion ... all the things that words increasingly fail to adequately express ... are shared across every barrier and chasm that might otherwise divide us.

It's so hard. I know when I am groaning, I can be so consumed by my own pain that I can ignore the groans of even those closest to me. And ... it is only as we listen deeply to one another's groanings even as we groan ourselves. It is only as we learn in compassion and empathy that our groanings are one ... then healing becomes possible and our world is transformed from a hideous cacophony to a heavenly chorus. Then, and only then, do our groanings have the possibility to birth something new, something wonderful.

I have enough British blood in me to know the temptation of the Queen. Certainly, the stiff upper lip was part of my upbringing. To do nothing but endure and persevere. To keep calm and carry on. To suppress my own groans and to close my ears to the groans of others.

And yet it should be noted that one of the most transformative moments for the House of Windsor in the last century happened when Princess Diana refused to do this. When at a time when the Queen, the Prime Minister and the President of the United States refused to even mention HIV/AIDS, she not only opened the UK's first HIV/AIDS unit in London but was photographed holding hands with a young man dying of the virus.

That one act ... from someone groaning from her own debilitating and potentially fatal disease of bulimia ... to hear the groans of another and embrace him across all the barriers and chasms that were supposed to keep them apart. That act of compassion rooted not in noblese oblige or distant pity but in common suffering perhaps did more to change the course of that pandemic toward healing than any other single act.

In her proclamation notes for these lectionary readings, Dr. Gafney writes of what they say to and for our human family, so estranged. She writes:

“In this family, as in many on a much smaller scale, there are divisions and hostilities, enmities and ruptures that also cross generational lines and lineages and, trouble the relationship between God and humanity. Romans 8 speaks to those divisions and the living hope of the living world for healing and reconciliation.

And then she continues...

“To this world of fractured and unreconciled peoples God sends a holy child as the embodiment of reconciliation. This singular extraordinary child is sent to a family (Mary and Joseph), an extended family (Elizabeth and Zechariah), a series of communities (Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum and more), a people (Israel) and, all peoples (Gentile and Jew representing the fullness of humanity).”

The hope of Advent is not that a child will come and save us while we wait passively by.

The hope of Advent is that all our suffering is bound together, and that God is that amazing section leader who from the midst of us, can hear our groans and add her own in a way that transforms cacophony into chorus.

The hope of Advent is the hope of which Anne Lamott speaks when she says “Hope begins in the night, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch ... and work: You don’t give up.”

What do we do when there are no words?

When the pain is too great?

When the despair is too deep?

When the exhaustion is too complete?

We sigh.

We groan.

We wail.

We listen.

We trust.

We hope.

You are not alone.

The whole creation is groaning together.

Groan boldly.

Listen closely.

Love deeply. Amen.